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ABSTRACT

Although the literature strongly suggests that children of divorced families suffer emotional disturbance and conduct disorders for at least a limited time, the treatment alternatives have not been widely discussed in the research literature. In clinical practice, individual or family therapies are most often considered, along with occasional individual counseling by a school counselor. This study examined clinical treatment of children in a school setting. Subjects included an experimental group of 14 second graders whose parents had been divorced 3 weeks to 1 year and a control group of 7 second graders with 2 from divorced and 5 from intact families. One-half of the experimental group participated in an interpersonal problem solving group and exposure to material specific to divorce. The other experimental subjects participated only in the general interpersonal problem solving curriculum. The divorce content specific group exhibited significant decreases in two of the three behavioral adjustment indicators measured, somatic complaints and verbal complaints or refusals. Temper outbursts did not vary significantly between groups. Use of a control group in examining the effect of a collaborative problem solving intervention supported use of the intervention, since the occurrence of peer altercations in the school setting were reduced. Long-term effects of the intervention, if any, were not studied.
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Children of Divorce: Group Treatment in a School Setting

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ABSTRACT

Although the literature strongly suggests that children of divorced families suffer emotional disturbance and conduct disorders for at least a limited time, the treatment alternatives have not been widely discussed in the research literature. In clinical practice, individual or family therapies are most often considered, along with occasional individual counseling by a school counselor. Availability of outpatient therapy may be severely limited by the restricted family resources due to the division of households.

The current study is based on clinical treatment of children in a school setting. The efficacy of group treatment for elementary school children is examined. The format was selected for several reasons. There has been a proliferation of the use of divorce groups for young children and adolescents in recent years but limited evaluation of these groups. Secondly, the therapeutic value of groups for children should be expected to be similar to the effectiveness for adults. Group modality may be especially effective for children from divorcing families, as it offers the opportunity to share similar experiences with other children and to build a support system in their immediate environment.

Introduction:

Approximately 40% of all children born in 1980 will live with only one parent before they reach the age of 18 as projected by Heatherington (1979). Although divorce is seen as a relatively common occurrence in our society, the process of divorce is replete with many far-reaching economic, social, and emotional consequences (King and Kleemeier 1983). Although the impact of divorce on children is well documented (Heatherington 1979; Guidubaldi and Perry 1984) there are few empirically supported models for prevention or treatment for adjustment difficulties.

A NASP-KSU (1986) review of the literature on intervention strategies for children of divorce lists 40 intervention program references. The intervention models cover individual and group formats, home, school and clinic based service delivery; and run the gambit from play therapy, bibliotherapy and parent training to crisis intervention, stress management, and social problem solving. While many of these proposed approaches have convincing arguments for their models and delivery systems, only 22% were investigative studies. Of these 22%, three studies concerned themselves with indirect effects on children via parent training strategies.

Of the remaining six studies which provided direct intervention to children, one of these was a general family change adjustment group which was non-specific to divorce issues. Five dealt directly with specific divorce adjustment intervention. The results of these studies are mixed. Although positive attitude and behavioral changes were observed (Hinton, 1984; Pedro-Carroll 1984; Roseby & Deutsch, 1985) other studies did not support similar findings (Sheridan, Baker, and de Lissovoy, 1984; Snyder, 1984). Confounding any comparisons is that none of the studies was a replication.

With so few studies undertaken which cover intervention approaches, and limited to mostly 4th, 5th, & 6th grade students, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the efficacy of specific divorce adjustment groups on school aged youngsters in general, and more specifically for 1st or 2nd grade students. Research on the effects of intervention strategies for 6-7-8 year-olds who have experienced divorce is practically nonexistent.

Numerous studies support the contention that the divorce experience contributes to a wide range of adjustment difficulties. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) noted the existence of depression and Shinn (1980) observed poor school performance and high levels of anxiety. Hodges and Bloom (1984) found higher rates of disruptive behaviors for younger children. Guidubaldi, Clemishaw, Perry and McLonghlin (1983) in a comprehensive study concluded children of divorce are at risk

for problems in school. If the divorce experience contributes to adjustment problems including poor peer relations, lower academic progress, and other negative behavioral and affective artifacts, its seems plausible interpersonal problem solving models might be appropriately applied to assist the child in adjusting to the divorce experience.

Unfortunately general interpersonal problem solving approaches have not fared well when empirically scrutinized (Gillespie, Durlak, and Sherman, 1982). While such approaches appear theoretically consistent, their intervention and curricular translation has been limited. The element of mutual collaboration and support among those learning the process is often lacking. Classroom presented problem solving interventions seldom support a collaborative effort among students. Smaller counseling groups can also inadvertently fall prey to the same problem. Children in groups may focus on the group leader as the "oracle" rather than develop collaborative resources among themselves.

An additional consideration is whether young children generalize problem solving skills to specific and emotion-laden situations. General problem solving interventions may need to contain situational, content specific material rather than rely upon the younger child to make that application.

The length of treatment could also effect application. Most divorce adjustment group studies ran for 6 to 10 weeks. Realistically, at approximately 30 minutes once per week, a 10 week treatment translates to 5 hours of training to learn a relatively complex process.

The current study was undertaken to investigate two separate but related hypotheses. First, will children of divorce, exposed to a collaborative problem solving intervention with specific divorce process materials, as compared to those exposed only to a collaborative but general problem solving intervention exhibit significantly more decreases in the frequency of somatization (anxiety indicator), verbal complaints or refusals regarding visitation, and temper outbursts directed towards the custodial parent and siblings?

The second hypothesis covers three groups of subjects; those exposed to the specific divorce related material and collaborative problem solving (Group A), those exposed to a general collaborative problem solving (Group B) and those exposed to no treatment (Group C). Will Groups A and B show a significant reduction in frequency of peer conflict as compared to a no treatment control, and will Group A and B exhibit any differences based upon the variations of treatment exposure between the two?

Method

Subjects

The initial sample consisted of 14 2nd grade students, 6 females and 8 males, ages 7-8, whose parents had been divorced 3 weeks-to-one year. All subjects had been referred for inclusion in a "Divorce Adjustment Group" by either their custodial parent or teacher, and in all cases parental permission was obtained.

A second sample, a control comparison group for the school behavior measure, consisted of seven 2nd grade students. These students were selected at random from the remaining pool of 114 second grade students. This sample consisted of 4 males and 3 females, ages 7-8; 2 from divorced families and 5 from intact families (never divorced).

Measures

Four measures were collected:

- 1) Frequency of somatic complaints by the subjects the day prior to and the day following visitation.
- 2) Frequency of verbal complaints about or refusals for visitation by the subjects the day prior to, the day of, and the day following the visitation.
- 3) Frequency of temper outbursts by the subjects with custodial parent or siblings the day following visitations.
- 4) Frequency of verbal or physical altercations with peers at school in which an adult intervened.

Procedure

The initial 14 students were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Group A (n=7) subjects participated in a 35 minute, once per week, 16 week, interpersonal problem solving group. The group was based upon the model and materials developed by the Rochester Primary Mental Health Project (1978). The format was augmented to emphasize a collaborative/cooperative approach. In addition, Group A was exposed to material specific to the process of divorce. For instance, role-playing included scenarios relevant to the subjects' experiences (visitation concerns, custody conflicts, being enlisted by a parent as a go-between.) Aspiration-building and other overt positive self-perception exercises were employed.

Group B, (n=7) participated only in the general interpersonal problem solving curriculum with no specific reference or skill practice made to the content or process of divorce. The length of treatment was constant with Group A's exposure. Both groups were led by a Masters-level, certified

School Psychologist. The parents and teachers were not aware of the differences in treatment approaches.

Design and Analysis

A randomized Post-test only design was employed with one tailed t-tests computed due to interest in each of the variables in and of themselves, and the directionality hypothesized.

Hypothesis 2 was examined using a simple one factor design with ANOVA analysis. As interest was expressed in the performance of each of the three groups in relationship to each other, multiple t-comparisons comprised follow-ups.

Results

Somatization

Group A had a lower mean frequency of somatic complaints than did Group B (1.0 and 2.285 respectively). Using a one tailed t-test, due to the directionality in the hypothesis, Group A exhibited significantly less somatization than did Group B, $p < .01$ (See Table 1). Given the small n, F_{max} was examined. Homogeneity of variance existed for this data.

Complaints

Group A had a mean number of complaints/refusals of 1.857 whereas Group B had a mean of 3.714. Group A exhibited significantly fewer complaints/refusals than did Group B, $p < .05$ (See Table 2). Homogeneity of variance held for this set also.

Temper Outbursts

Group A and Group B were not found to be significantly different with regards to frequency of temper outbursts (t -value=.920). The means for Group A and Group B, 2.143 and 3 respectively, and other relevant information is found in Table 3. Homogeneity of variance held for this sample.

Peer Altercations

Hypothesis 2 results are found in Table 4. Group A had a mean of .574 with group B and group C's means .714 and 1.857 respectively. The obtained F (4.158) was significant at the .05 level. T-test follow-ups (two-tailed) revealed no significant difference between Group A and B, but significant differences were found between Group A and Group C ($p < .05$) and between Group B and Group C ($p < .05$). Once again homogeneity of variance was met.

Discussion

The divorce content specific group exhibited significant decreases in two of the three behavioral adjustment indicators measured--somatic complaints and verbal complaints or refusals. Incidental reports from parents of children in Group A suggested that their children seemed more relaxed about visitation in general. One parent described her child as "more relaxed" with "visitation stomach aches" having disappeared. An obvious consideration is whether a possible halo effect occurred. However, Group B exhibited no matched decrease in the frequency of somatization or verbal complaints/refusals while being in the same named group as Group A.

These findings lend qualified support to the use of a collaborative problem solving method using specific divorce process materials as a more effective intervention rather than a general problem solving approach. However, the absence of a no-treatment control group limited the ability to rule out the possibility that being in a group entitled "Divorce Adjustment Group" interacted in some way with the actual treatments. Group B might also have exhibited improvement compared to a control group but not as much as Group A.

The third measure, frequency of temper outbursts, did not vary significantly between the two groups. In reviewing the content of the group, situations which could prompt sibling and/or parent-directed temper outbursts were discussed and alternative responses and solutions were practiced in both groups. These situations were not considered divorce specific. Once again, the absence of a control group precludes any conclusions about learned efficiencies in problem solving applications compared to a no-treatment group.

A control group was not used in this instance due to concerns about the political ramifications of not treating referred students. The possible perception of "doing nothing" with a group of students for 16 weeks by members of the teaching staff was felt to have the potential of negatively impacting the future delivery of services in this particular system. This situation however does not mitigate the need for inclusion of a control group to examine the questions left unanswered by the results.

A control group was used in examining the effect of a collaborative problem solving intervention on the frequency of a school behavior (peer altercations). The results supported the use of collaborative problem solving interventions to reduce the occurrence of peer altercations in the school setting. The presence of divorce specific material with the problem solving intervention model did not appear to dilute the students' ability to generalize and apply problem solving skills to peer situations.

The findings support the efficacy of secondary prevention measures to reduce peer conflict and is consistent with other findings (Butler et al., 1980; Durlak, 1980; Mannarino et al., 1982). Although generalized interpersonal problem solving approaches have not been supported as effective interventions (Kirschenbaum and Ordman 1984), this study suggests a situation specific content, cooperative problem solving approach has promise.

This study has examined the effect of combining interpersonal problem solving intervention in a relatively longterm cooperative peer support group, with divorce specific content and process materials and found it preliminarily promising. Further research is needed in this area. There are several inherent limitations in the current study. While the measures collected were unobtrusive, they were fairly limited behavioral indices of overall adjustments. They need to be expanded. These measures do not address the longterm effect, if any, of the treatment.

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